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Reagan offers a compromise on 'contra' aid

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WASHINGTON — In an eleventh-hour bid for House votes to support aid to the "contra" rebels of Nicaragua, the White House offered yesterday to seek diplomatic solutions to the Central American conflict while delaying the release of most of the aid for 90 days.

The administration proposal to delay release of all but $25 million of the $100 million that the president has requested is in fact merely a restatement of provisions already contained in the legislation on which the House is scheduled to vote today. Nevertheless, yesterday's White House proposal did mark the first strong linkage between aid to the rebels and a new, serious effort to achieve a peaceful settlement.

Meanwhile, House Democratic leaders, struggling to hold on to what they conceded was a "narrowing," slim margin of votes opposing the president's aid request, countered with conciliatory steps toward moderates in their own party.

If the president's aid request is defeated on a vote today, House leaders offered to renew the issue April 15 and permit party moderates to submit their own compromise aid plan as part of an emergency supplemental spending bill.

As debate on the aid issue began in the House yesterday, what effect the counterproposals would have on today's ballot was unclear, but both sides expected the vote to be very close.

"It has narrowed very slightly and we are still ahead," House Majority Whip Thomas S. Foley, D-Wash., said of the margin against the president's plan.

"We have not got it locked up," House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel, R-Ill., said of a vote supporting the president. Mr. Michel was distressed that the administration had made the last-minute compromise offer after saying earlier there would be none, and he said there was no assurance that the offer would turn around enough votes for the president.

But Larry M. Speakes, the White House spokesman, said: "We are very, very close to achieving passage on this." Late last night, a senior administration official said the president's position was two or three votes short of approval.

Under the rules for the ballot, only a yes or no vote on the original request for $70 million in military aid and $30 million in humanitarian aid will be conducted today. The administration's compromise offer of a 90-day delay was contained in a draft executive order that would be separate from the pending aid legislation and would be signed if the aid request is approved by Congress.

According to a copy of the draft order obtained at the Capitol, for 90 days the administration would agree to limit military aid to the rebels to weapons for "defense against air attacks," such as surface-to-air missiles, and military-related training.

Mr. Speakes said the president would agree to release $25 million immediatedly to the "contras" for both humanitarian and military purposes during the 90-day period. The original aid request also specified that only 25 percent of the funds, or $25 million, would be released in the first 90 days. Mr. Speakes said that the administration would be free to divide the initial funds as it saw fit for military and humanitarian purposes.

In [redacted] Congress included in a message sent to Capitol Hill last night, the president pledged as part of the proposed order, "I will not augment this $100 million through the use of CIA or any other funds that have not been approved by Congress for this purpose."

The order also proposed releasing $2 million to help promote the Contadora regional peace process.

During the 90 day-period, the president would send his special envoy, Philip C. Habib, on an "urgent mission" to meet with Central American leaders and urge the Nicaraguan government to "initiate a national dialogue" with all dissident factions, according to the order.

In addition, the plan calls for the Sandinista government to agree to a cease-fire during the 90-day period, ending a state of emergency and permitting free speech and assembly.

The president would name a five-member commission "to monitor Nicaragua's responsiveness to negotiations," Mr. Speakes said. But "it would ultimately be decided by the president" if talks were not progressing and the rest of the "contra" aid should be released, Mr. Speakes said.

The plan does not specifically provide for a second vote by Congress to release the remaining funds, but Mr. Speakes said Congress would have 15 days in which to enact a resolution disapproving of the release of the money. The president could veto that measure, but Congress could override a veto by a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

Mr. Speakes said the compromise plan was "a good faith effort to meet the concerns of those on the Hill."

The compromise emerged from administration talks late Tuesday and throughout the day yesterday with Representatives Rod Chandler, R-Wash., and Dave McCurdy, D-Okla. While Mr. Chandler was satisfied with the compromise, Mr. McCurdy was not.

Mr. McCurdy, who engineered a contra aid compromise last year, joined with House Democratic leaders yesterday in opposing the executive order and said he and other moderate Democrats would push their own binding, legislative alternative April 15 if the administration plan is rejected today.

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